Living in a Turbulent World

John 16:33

January 22, 2017

We live in a turbulent world. The future is completely uncertain. Yet even in such a world, we can live strongly and walk unshaken, because we trust in the Lord who is with us. We may observe the present world from the perspectives of international politics, military affairs, or economics, but we Christians must also perceive it through the history of gospel proclamation.

When we look at the movements of today's world in light of gospel history, several currents become clear.

I. The Rise of Christianity in the So-Called "Third World"

Today, the gospel is advancing rapidly and the Christian population is growing dramatically in countries once referred to as the Third World—nations outside the traditional Christian and white-majority world. Especially significant are lands where highly developed religions were absent, or where religion, though once present, was destroyed by the powerful ideology of communism and its military enforcement. This includes parts of Africa, Buddhist nations of Southeast Asia, and Catholic countries in Latin America and the Philippines. Both Buddhism and Catholicism have long hindered the gospel, but in recent decades they can no longer resist, and change is spreading quickly.

The wave of Pentecostal missions—emphasizing the authority of Scripture and the living power of the Holy Spirit—is pressing forward with irresistible force. Yet there is also danger here: as local religions and cultural customs mingle with Christian teaching, a different kind of religion may emerge. Their shallow understanding of the Bible, and their overemphasis on visible miracles and experiences, often leads them to pursue only experiential faith.

II. The Decline of the Church in Historic Christian Nations

Another great current is the decline of churches in countries once known as historically Christian. Magnificent church buildings are falling into ruin. Young people

no longer heed church teaching, regarding it as outdated authoritarianism. Many have left the church because its teachings seem out of step with their conscience and humanity; others never had interest to begin with.

What they emphasize instead is a universal human nature that transcends church and religion. This can be perilous, for it sidelines God and puts humanity at the center. Negative expressions of this are especially visible in sexual ethics: an increase in those who cannot identify as male or female, the celebration of gender reassignment, the recognition of same-sex marriage, the normalization of cohabitation, and the ridicule of biblical morality as old-fashioned.

Yet there is also a positive side: when human nature is emphasized in its better aspects, it leads to world peace, equality, and human rights, allowing people across religions and cultures to join hands. Movements based on such ideals continue to grow.

Amid these two opposing currents, what should Japanese Christians think and how should we act?

III. The Proper Attitude of Christians

In such sweeping tides, we must act with sound biblical understanding and solid faith. While we may recognize the rapid growth of Christianity in the Third World as a whole as good, we must remain cautious not to be swept away. If faith is only a distorted version of traditional Western Christianity, its growth in numbers may still lead far from the pure teaching of Scripture.

We must also be vigilant regarding our own churches. For instance, in Japan, under the influence of American trends, we are carried along by a culture that idolizes free-market economics. Yet Jesus clearly said, "You cannot serve both God and wealth." Still, many pursue riches without sorrow for those cast into poverty by their pursuit—this too has become part of Christianity.

What about those who have abandoned the Western church? Within them we can also discern something: an awakening to humanity's original nature as created in God's image. Their rejection of Western Christianity stems from their recognition of its errors, in light of the human essence God gave them. Similarly, many Japanese reject Christianity because it contradicts their sense of humanity and even seems to reverse it.

Without Bible or church, Japan nonetheless preserved a high level of humanity and ethics compared to traditional Christian nations. While Christian powers waged endless wars, justifying killing and plunder, Japan, under the Tokugawa Shogunate, enjoyed 260 years without war. Though technologically behind in machines and natural science, Japan built a society that valued human nature and fostered a culture unconnected to war.

Still, we must remember that humanity created in God's image has been corrupted by sin. We must not confuse this distorted humanity with the original. Sin's power is immense, and only through the Holy Spirit can it be overcome. The worst result of humanity's estrangement from the Creator is idolatry (Romans 1:18–32). God's judgment against idolatry has manifested in sexual disorder and countless related sins.

Therefore, as Christians seeking to stand on Scripture—not Western Christian traditions—we must make concrete judgments, choices, and actions. We cannot simply rejoice at the growth of Third World Christianity. Nor should we despair at the decline of traditional churches. Instead, we should see both as natural outcomes of humanity awakening to its original nature, while recognizing that this humanity is also twisted by sin. We must remain alert to those who insist that moral corruption itself is "human nature."

At present, Trump has become president of the United States, Britain has left the EU, Putin eyes opportunities, Xi Jinping schemes to expand Chinese power, and North Korea continues its irrational threats while South Korea rages with victimhood. Until recently, world affairs proceeded at least outwardly under the guise of human rights, democracy, and peace. But now these leaders seem to have cast aside such coverings, revealing naked self-interest, national self-centeredness, and ambitions of economic and territorial expansion. Stable international relations appear ever less likely.

In such times, what matters for us is to study more earnestly the teaching of the Bible—not Western Christianity, but the Bible itself—and to obey the Creator God. Such a way of life may bring betrayal or loss, but under the shadow of God's wings, we will live in peace, knowing that He loves and protects us.